

## BLACKBUCKS IN BALLIPADAR-BHETNAI WILDLIFE RESERVE, ORISSA

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The blackbuck *Antelope cervicapra* is elegant and one of the most spectacular wildlife of Indian sub-continent. In Oriya it is called as "Baliharina" or "Krisnasara Mruga". This animal is now listed as an endangered species under Scheduled- I animal as per Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. It is the sole survivor of the genus *Antelope*. Once upon a time it was distributed in various places of Orissa like Cuttack, Puri, Balasore, Ganjam, Bolangir and Kalahandi. But now are available only in Balukhand area of Puri district and Balipadar-Bhetnai Wildlife Reserve of Ganjam district. The latter represents a place where black bucks are being protected by the local people for many years. Long before, there was record of blackbuck occurrence in this area. During 1981, it was published in "Prajamitra" that there were approximately 100 number of blackbucks here. This number has now been increased to about 800 as reported by 1994 Census.

The Ballipadar-Bhetnai Wildlife Reserve is situated between 19°35'-19°55' N, 84°35'-84°50' E covering an area of 72.80 square kilometers, where 60-65% are cultivated land, 12-15% rocky elevations, 10-15% man made houses and roads, 5-6% forest cover and 7-8% water bodies. The soil is slightly acidic, maximum air temperature, 17-41°C and relative humidity 65-94%.

The slender body of blackbuck measures 80 cm for an adult male and 65-70 cm for an adult female, average weight being 40 kg. The young weighs about 4 kg. The females and young males are light brown in colour whereas male is greyish black at back and face and white on ventral side with a white line below each eye. The spirally twisted horns in male is 30-35" long.

The blackbucks are generally seen in rice fields. They feed on soft parts of varieties of crop plants and grasses. During hot hours of the day, they take rest. They run at a speed of 50-60 miles per hour when alarmed and often jump upto a distance of 1-3 meters and 1-2 meters high.

The blackbucks are social animals consisting of groups of herds. These are: i) mixed herds (formed by males and females of different age groups); ii) harem herds (with one territorial male and females with all age groups); iii) bachelors (all male groups); iv) all female group; v) lone territorial male. Besides, the lone pregnant female are individually isolated into a separated group.

The blackbucks are territorial. They maintain their integrity within a specific area where the territorial male rules over. With the use of dung heaps, urination spots landforms and location of shrubs and trees it identifies its limitation. This helps the blackbucks to return to the same area after prosecution. The territory is large for larger herds and small for smaller ones. It was recorded that the territory of a lone territorial male was the smallest about 1 hectare.

The blackbucks are prolific breeders. They can reproduce throughout the year. After an age of two years or more, the females become capable of reproduction. The gestation period is 175-190 days, and at a time one fawn is produced. The length from tip to tip is about 72 cm and shoulder height 39 cm at birth. The mother takes care of the fawn till it is finally absorbed into the herd. The average life span of the blackbuck is between 12-15 years.

The Ballipadar-Bhetnai Wildlife Reserve is an unique example of human-blackbuck relationship where animals are protected by socio-religious belief of local people. Although crop damage by blackbucks is of regular occurrence, old people believe that the animals are sacred increasing fertility of land. As conservation of blackbuck is highly appreciated for its scientific significance and educational value, some suggestive conservation measures like public awareness and people's participation, supply of subsidised seeds and fertilizers to the poor farmers, translocation of blackbucks to other similar habitat away from human habitation etc. should be followed.